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SUBJECT Interview With Vernon Walters

PAT MITCHELL: Another man who was touched by Watergate was Lieutenant General Vernon Walters. He was Deputy Director of the CIA at the time of that scandal. General Walters has since retired and has written his memoirs, "Silent Missions." He's also, by the way, the opening speaker for tonight's Cocoran Gallery's 1978 lecture series that begins tonight with General Walters.

According to Haldeman's book, General Walters, if we might talk about that just one more time, he says that he and John Dean asked you to go Acting FBI Director Patrick Gray and ask Mr. Gray to call off the Bureau's investigation of Watergate.

Did you do that? Did that happen? And what was your understanding of the...

GENERAL VERNON WALTERS: Well, that is not a very accurate description of what happened. He sent for me, along with Mr. Helms, and I saw him in his office. And he told me that the continuation of the FBI's investigation in Mexico would possibly uncover some CIA assets; and to ask him, since the people had been arrested, to lay off the investigation in Mexico.

MITCHELL: And when you asked him...

GENERAL WALTERS: Not in the rest of the United States. That's a rather important item.

Now, I had been at the CIA six weeks and I did not know, and probably after four years I didn't know, every operation they were conducted. So, this was the Chief of Staff to the President. I had no reason to believe he was asking to do something wrong or underhanded.

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In the matter of national security, in such areas, until the Watergate, no one really questioned the President's powers in these areas.

But when you went to Patrick Gray, he agreed to stop, right? He agreed to do what you had asked.

GENERAL WALTERS: When I told him this.

Now, the reason why I agreed to go to Pat Gray is that for three years I had been running secret negotiations for the President in Paris with the North Vietnamese and with the Chinese Communists; in fact, the opening contact that led to the President's visit to China, and so forth. And I reported directly to the White House on this. The CIA knew nothing about it.

My belief at the time that Haldeman spoke to me was that there was something like this going with Castro in Mexico City.

Now, that was on a Friday. John Dean was not there. On Friday I was called by Mr. Dean. And in the meantime, when I went back to the CIA, I asked, "Is there any traffic coming out of Mexico City that we're not reading, from the Embassy?" Because I would send messages from the Paris Embassy to the White House on the negotiations with the North Vietnamese and Chinese that I would encode myself. And therefore the station there would know that there were messages going out, but they would not know the content. So I thought, if there's something like this going on in Mexico, there will be traffic that is not being read.

PAT BUCHANAN: General, can I ask you about that meeting, the one with Haldeman and Ehrlichman, I think the famous June 23rd meeting, where it was alleged that Haldeman did ask for the containment by the FBI? It was said that he mentioned...

GENERAL WALTERS: In Mexico only.

BUCHANAN: Yeah -- mentioned the Bay of Pigs, and Director Helms grabbed the arms of his chair. And Haldeman implies that this meant a connection with assassination.

Is your recollection of that meeting similar to Haldeman's recollection of that meeting?

GENERAL WALTERS: No. I haven't read Mr. Haldeman's book, to tell you the truth. I got back from a trip around the world yesterday. I did glance at the Newsweek thing.

Mr. Helms did not, to my recollection, grab the arms of his chair at all. When he brought up the Bay of Pigs, Helms said, with some irritation, "I don't see what the Bay of Pigs has got to do with this."

BUCHANAN: But he was not panicked by the thing, at all.

GENERAL WALTERS: No.

BUCHANAN: You went back and wrote several memoranda of conversation. I remember because in the White House I had to read those. Those were written several days, though, after the meeting.

GENERAL WALTERS: Right.

BUCHANAN: Why was there a delay in the writing of the memorandum of conversation after the conversation?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, the first time -- on Monday, when Dean called me, I didn't know who he was. And he said, "Well, you can check out with Ehrlichman that it's all right to talk to me." So I did, and Ehrlichman said, "Yes, Dean is in charge of this whole project."

So I then went down to see him, and he told me he was handling this and he was in touch with Gray, and everything else. And I told him that after I went back to the CIA on the Friday, I checked to see whether there was any possible asset in Mexico that might be exposed by the containing of the investigation in Mexico.

Frankly, when he mentioned Mexico, I had never heard the word before. I didn't know there was any connection with Mexico. It was the first I'd heard of it.

MITCHELL: And you found out there wasn't, didn't you?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well -- no, no, but the...

MITCHELL: I mean you found out...

GENERAL WALTERS: ...laundering the money, I had never head of at that time.

CHARLES COLSON: But that's a good question. Was there any connection, in fact?

BUCHANAN: And why did, six months later, did the CIA, which is alleged, destroy documents and tapes related to conversations on Watergate after...

GENERAL WALTERS: I have no knowledge of any such -- Mr. Helms...

MITCHELL: I'd like you answer the question that Chuck and I asked you, however.

GENERAL WALTERS: Which was?

COLSON: Was there, in fact, any connection in the CIA that -- I mean it may have been that they asked you to go into it for the wrong reasons, but was there, in fact, anything in the CIA that might have been compromised...

GENERAL WALTERS: No. You and I are at opposite poles on this issue. The CIA had enough Republicans in it who could have exploded any attempt to use this against the President or to do the President dirt.

MITCHELL: And you are referring to whether or not the CIA had anything to do with the Watergate break-in...

GENERAL WALTERS: That's right. That's right.

MITCHELL: ...which is not specifically what Chuck was asking about.

GENERAL WALTERS: But basically I found nothing that could be exposed by this. And that is what I told Dean on Monday, the very next working day after I had seen Gray.

BUCHANAN: You're talking about the assets in Mexico. Now, I'm referring now to the alleged Hunt's connection still with the CIA, the Martinez connection.

Was the CIA apprised of the operations of the Hunt-Liddy team going into...

GENERAL WALTERS: I was not apprised of it. I was the Deputy Director, and I had no knowledge whatever of it.

COLSON: But you came in after. You see, what the file shows -- and I've read the CIA file, which was yay thick, that was sent both to the Congress and to the White House, and it all proceeded your being there. But it was very clear that Hunt had been over meeting with Cushman, had lunch with him, had all kinds of memos going back and forth, that the CIA developed the so-called casing photos for the Ellsberg break-in, and even circled Dr. Fielding's name on one of the pictures, and it was sent up to Helms' office and General Cushman, your predecessor. There was a big file.

And I think what Pat is asking you is, while you were Deputy Director, why did the CIA destroy all of its tapes after Senator Mansfield asked that they be retained...

GENERAL WALTERS: I don't believe that's an accurate statement.

COLSON: Well, they said they did. Director Helms...

GENERAL WALTERS: No, they didn't. I believe Mr. Helms destroyed some of his files when he left, and they weren't necessarily Watergate files, when he left the agency, as a number of previous Directors had done, he had done. But I do not believe that the agency per se destroyed any tapes or files. I do not think that is an accurate statement.

COLSON: Well, in early 1974, you'll find, in January, a letter from Senator Mansfield to the agency asking for all tapes to be preserved. And it was immediately, within the next week, that the agency later acknowledged to Senator Baker that they had destroyed all of the tapes.

Were you there then?

GENERAL WALTERS: I was there then, and I still do not believe that is an accurate statement.

Mr. Helms had been replaced as Director by Schlesinger and was leaving. Senator Mansfield's letter came about that time. And I believe that Mr. Helms felt that he was destroying files that had nothing to do with the Watergate.

COLSON: Well, the facts, General, are that it was January of 1974 that Senator Mansfield wrote and asked that all the tapes be retained. Mr. Colby later testified to Senator Baker, and it's on...

BUCHANAN: Are you sure it wasn't '73?

GENERAL WALTERS: '73. I think you're quite wrong on that. It was '73.

COLSON: I think it was '74

GENERAL WALTERS: No, it was '73.

BUCHANAN: Helms was in Iran by '74.

COLSON: Helms wasn't there; Colby was.

GENERAL WALTERS: No, no, it was '73.

COLSON: Colby...

GENERAL WALTERS: I recall the letter from Senator Mansfield. I believe it came on the 22nd of January.

MITCHELL: That's a pretty specific memory, I think...

BUCHANAN: Let me ask you about the damage to the Central Intelligence Agency abroad in its contacts from (A) the leaks, these individuals going out writing books, and (B) the revelations from

Congress.

Has the CIA's capacity, sort of eyes and ears overseas, been crippled by what's gone on in this country?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, obviously, it has done some damage. It has done considerable damage. But quite frankly, it has done less damage than I had thought it would.

By the nature of things, since the Directors -- and I was there under four Directors -- were to tied up with the Congress, a great deal of my responsibility was dealing with the foreign friendly services and our friends abroad. And, frankly, I think they showed extraordinary patience with us while we were making a spectacle of ourselves to which there was no parallel in history.

BUCHANAN: So you disagree with what the Congress has done, and the way, and they were just sort of...

GENERAL WALTERS: I believe that you cannot run an intelligence service in Macy's window. General Washington understood this. I'll just give you one little, short story. He spent the night, one night, at a sympathizer's home in Connecticut, and in the morning the sympathizer's wife said to him, "General, where are you going to ride today?" He leaned down in the saddle and he said, "Madam, can you keep a secret?" She said, "Of course." He said, "So can I, Madam," tipped his hat and rode on.

MITCHELL: Then I assume you agree that Mr. Helms should not have spoken before that committee.

GENERAL WALTERS: I can tell you is if I'd been in Mr. Helms' place, I would have done exactly the same thing that he did. He was confronted with violating one of two oaths.

BUCHANAN: Right.

GENERAL WALTERS: Everybody forgets that the Director of Central Intelligence is the only person in the United States Government, without exception, who is charged by statute from the Congress with the protection of his sources and methods.

BUCHANAN: Right.

GENERAL WALTERS: Now, when he was before that committee, he had a choice of doing one of two things. Either he did not tell them the whole story, which is what he did; or he broke his oath that he would protect his sources and methods. That operation was still ongoing. Any hesitation by him would have uncovered it. There was no way he could get out of that hearing without...

BUCHANAN: Exactly.

GENERAL WALTERS: ...breaking one of those two oaths. He chose to break the one that would not endanger people's lives.

I think, in his position, I would have made the same choice.

COLSON: There's a third way, which is simply to refuse to answer.

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, that would have uncovered the ongoing operation.

BUCHANAN: It would have been an admission of...

GENERAL WALTERS: That there was something going on.

BUCHANAN: Yeah. Yeah.

Let me ask you about the CIA circa 1978. We've had what's been called a purge of 800 members of clandestine services, and it's been said this has really crippled morale out at the agency, that they've got signs out there -- Admiral Turner's running it -- you know, "Beat Navy" right on the bulletin board, and morale is down.

What is your reading of the morale of the CIA, of Turner's continued capacity to handle and run the agency, given what's happened there?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, I will just simply say that I have not been back there a great deal since I left. When I was there, occasionally former Directors and Deputy Directors would come in loaded with advice on what should be done and what should not be done, and so forth. And I determined that when I left I would not do this.

Let me just put it this way...

BUCHANAN: Can you give us the advice?

GENERAL WALTERS: Let me just put it this way...

MITCHELL: He could be listening, General.

GENERAL WALTERS: The American intelligence community has been through the most traumatic experience that any intelligence community in history has ever been through. What it needs now is a little quiet and stability. Massive changes in personnel and programs, in my opinion, will not give it this.

BUCHANAN: Uh-huh. Well, I guess you would disagree...

MITCHELL: What do you think about his leadership, Stansfield Turner, and about his desire to be -- to, you know, put all of the intelligence community under one big umbrella which he would head?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, I think that is a difficult thing to do, since most of the money goes to Defense. And I just don't see the Secretary of Defense opening his hand...

MITCHELL: No, he didn't do it graciously. That's for sure.

GENERAL WALTERS: Actually, I've read these alleged changes, and I don't see they're very different from what Bill Colby or George Bush had: an overseeing right on the budget, but he doesn't actually determine the budget. And that existed in previous Directors.

The whole thing I think the American people have got to face up to is no matter how powerful the United States is, if it is blind and deaf, it's going to be a pushover.

BUCHANAN: Well, I would think, if you get rid of 800 of your clandestine services, your senior officers, a lot of station chiefs in Western Europe and elsewhere, then you're crippling the institutional memory of the agency, are you not?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, I think one of the things that people have got to realize is that there's a place for amateurs nearly everywhere, but not in the intelligence business.

MITCHELL: But Mr. Turner has said himself -- I think we ought to assess that...

BUCHANAN: Stansfield Turner, please note.

MITCHELL: Yes. He said, himself, there's no need for that kind of intelligence community anymore, you know? That technique has replaced the secret...

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, I'm afraid I disagree with him. If we hadn't had Benjamin Franklin engaged in the covert operation of getting France involved in the war against Great Britain during the Revolution, we might not have this country and we might have a different form of government at this time. Fortunately, Benjamin Franklin was successful, even though his office was fully penetrated by the British.

BUCHANAN: You negotiated those Paris Accords, or helped to negotiate them. They were violated from day one by the North



Vietnamese and the Soviet Union, were they not?

What's your feeling about the agreement we got? Even if Henry negotiated -- or, Dr. Kissinger negotiated the final agreement, what's your feeling (A) about the agreement we got and (B) about how we followed up on our commitments?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, I think the agreement we got was not necessarily a bad agreement. But I think that if the President had not been crippled by Watergate, or, in fact, replaced by the time the major violations came, and the United States had taken...

BUCHANAN: He'd been there 18 months, now, while the violations were going on. He was in there from March of '73 to August of '74. By then, North Vietnam had been completely re-equipped, he'd been stripped of the power to bomb, they'd cut off assistance.

What should Nixon have done? Should he have stepped up and resigned and said, "Look, I can't fulfill my commitments under these treaties"? Or should he have acted?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, actually, the violations up to that time were somewhat peripheral. It wasn't until the great offensive at Ban Me Thuot that really there was a point of retaliation. He was no longer President at that time.

I am confident, certain, that if he had been President, he would have told Hanoi that the B-52s would be over Hanoi...

BUCHANAN: He would have violated the law.

MITCHELL: General Walters, didn't the North Vietnamese ask you for the assassination of Thieu at one point?

GENERAL WALTERS: They didn't ask me. But at one point, they were talking to Dr. Kissinger -- and in all fairness to Dr. Kissinger, the squib that reported this left out his answer. Le Duc Tho, who was the member of the politburo, said to him, "Get rid of Thieu. Get rid of Thieu." And Kissinger said, "I don't know what you mean." And there several back-and-forths. Both Kissinger and I knew what he meant, but I think Kissinger wanted to make him actually say it. And he said, "What do you mean, kill him?" Le Duc Tho said, "Yes, but you don't have to put that in the agreement." And Dr. Kissinger then said, "That would be criminal and dishonorable, and the United States will have no part in it."

MITCHELL: You also worked with another world leader for many, many years, and one you talk about in the book, and that was De Gaulle. Very few people knew him, worked with him 27 years.

10

Has history been kind to this leader?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, I think General De Gaulle, like all human beings, had a number of things I didn't agree with. But if I was a Frenchman, I would probably have been a Gaullist.

He had considerable foresight in seeing what was going to happen. For instance, he told us a long time ago that the Third World nations would get control of the United Nations, and eventually it would make us do things that we didn't particularly want to do.

BUCHANAN: He told us to cut and run in Vietnam, too, didn't he?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, yes, because I think that after the Bay of Pigs, when he had told us to go ahead -- or, rather, after the Cuban Missile Crisis, when he was almost the only European leader who said, "Go ahead," we didn't. He came to the conclusion...

BUCHANAN: He said, "Go ahead." What do you mean, invade?

GENERAL WALTERS: Do whatever you want to Cuba.

BUCHANAN: Invade?

GENERAL WALTERS: Yes.

BUCHANAN: Uh-huh.

GENERAL WALTERS: He said -- after we didn't do that, he said, "If they're not going to fight for Cuba, 90 miles from the United States, what makes we think they're going to fight for France, 3800 miles away? And I have to draw the consequences."

MITCHELL: Well, the consequences of that, and a lot of other Lieutenant General Vernon Walters' meetings throughout the years, and his work, is a part of "Silent Missions," his memoirs.

Thank you for sharing some of it with us.